“I see what looks cool”: Children and Parents’ Perceptions of Value and In-Game Purchases

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Keywords
In-game spending, children, value, Roblox

INTRODUCTION
Digital games are central to contemporary Australian childhoods. 80% of Australian children aged 1-17 play digital games (Brand et al. 2023). Mainstream discussions about children’s digital play are dominated by concerned parents, media panic and cautious policymakers, and there is a tendency to pathologise children and the media they engage with, ultimately politicising childhood play (Grimes 2015). In scholarship, concerns around children’s digital play often focus on excessive screentime (Kawas et al. 2021), ‘addiction’ (Carter et al. 2020; Mavoa et al. 2017) and gambling (Kristiansen & Severin 2020; Zendle et al. 2019). Meanwhile, in popular media, game developers are frequently derided as predatory, manipulating naive child users into spending money (Four Corners 2021; Latham 2023). There are particular concerns about *Roblox* (Roblox Corporation 2006) as unsafe and predatory (Kou & Gui 2024; ScreenRant 2024; Winkie 2022), especially given that in August 2024, 42% of Roblox’s 380 million global users were under the age of 13 (Ball 2024). However, absent from much of this discourse is the perspectives of children themselves.

This paper reflects on a study of children’s experiences with spending money in digital games, and argues that children and parents perceive value differently when it comes to in-game spending. Understanding the disconnect between children and parents’ perceptions of value provides insights into how families could navigate the harms – and the benefits – associated with children’s in-game spending.

To centre children’s voices in these discussions, we conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with children aged 7-14 and their parents in Melbourne, Australia. These interviews explored children’s experiences of playing and spending in digital games, and parents’ approaches to navigating their child’s in-game spending. Interviews with children also included a ‘cultural probe’ (Ibrahim et al. 2024; Nansen et al. 2015), in which children were given an AU$20 voucher to spend however they liked. The AU$20 voucher allowed for interviews to move beyond abstract discussions about spending, eliciting ‘think-aloud’-like data which revealed insights into how children deliberate their in-game spending decisions.

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2025

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Of the 22 children interviewed, 19 spent their AU$20 voucher on in-game virtual currencies, cosmetic in-game items such as avatar skins or clothing, VIP game passes or battle passes, or functional items. Most of these purchases were made in either *Roblox* or *Fortnite* (Epic Games 2017). Three children opted to spend their voucher either partially or in full to purchase non-digital items, and one child planned to save their voucher and had not yet spent it eight months later. In interviews, children reasoned through their potential voucher spend options, demonstrating expertise when navigating spending decisions. Children proudly showed the interviewers their favourite items and digital collections, with several valuing items inspired by popular media they enjoyed, such as cosmetic skins from Fortnite's Marvel-themed season pass (figure 1) or avatars based on their favourite YouTube creators (figure 2). These considerations also point to children's perceptions of value regarding their digital in-game purchases, and their capacity to assess value when identifying that a purchase is "not worth it".

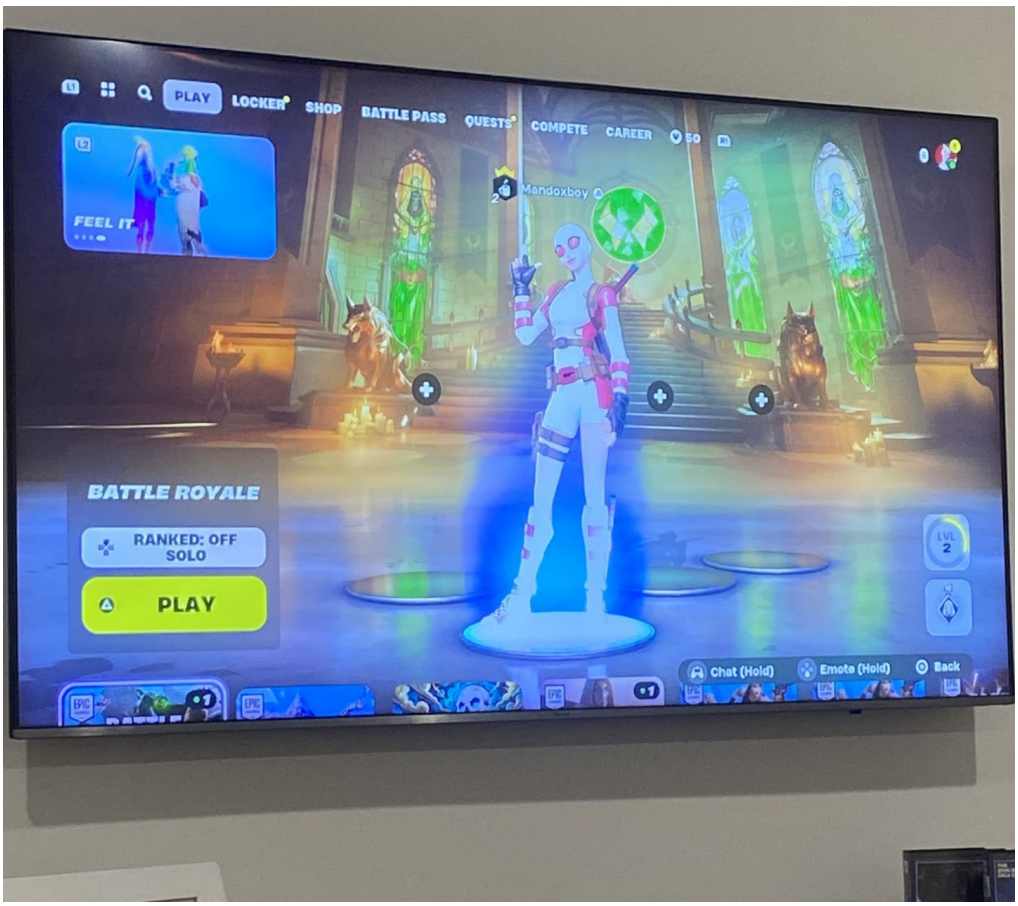

Figure 1: C19's Gwenpool avatar, from *Fortnite's* 'Marvel' season battle pass

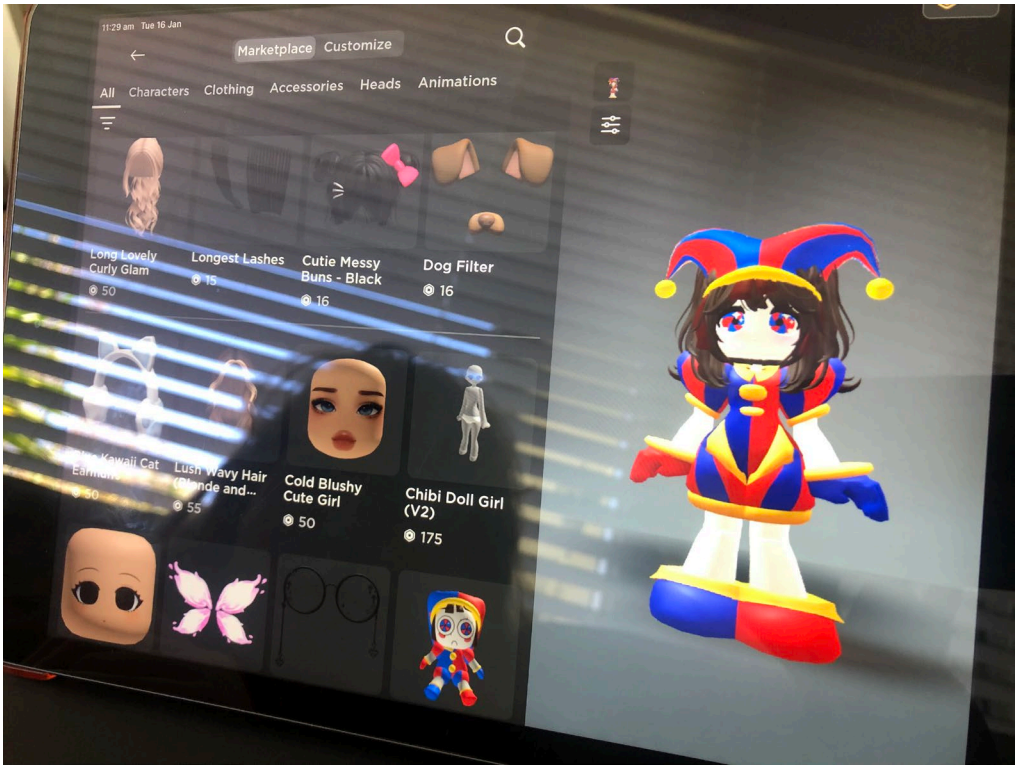

Figure 2: C5's *Roblox* avatar inspired by their favourite YouTube content creator

Although young people's perceptions of risk in digital games mirror popular discourses' concerns of addiction and overspending (Carter et al. 2020; Jensen & Bengtsson 2024), our findings echo those of Mills et al. (2024) who argue that children value the items they purchase in digital games, and that these items form a vital part of children's social lives.

However, parents' attitudes toward their children's in-game spending tended to align with popular discourse around gambling and addiction. There was a sense among parents that game developers are "unethical" or "villains" whose goal is to manipulate children into spending money. In-game spending features such as lootboxes were of particular concern to parents, who considered these features to be teaching their children to gamble. Some parents also felt that they did not understand the appeal of purchasing in-game items, explaining that digital items feel less "real" than physical items and are a "waste of money". These perceptions of value were further influenced by parents' cost of living concerns, with one parent explaining, "It all adds up."

For some families these differing perceptions were a source of tension with children, while in others they were approached as a way to navigate childhood development and learning around risk and spending. However, children's experiences with in-game monetisation demonstrates that media panic perceptions around addiction and gambling are not the full picture. While addressing concerns around harmful in-game spending features such as lootboxes, virtual currencies and "dark design" patterns (Zagal et al. 2013) is vital, game design and policy should take children's perceptions of value and harm into account to best support children in navigating game monetisation.

BIO

Taylor Hardwick is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Sydney researching how children experience monetisation in digital games. Her research focuses on games events and production, communities and cultures, and safety in digital spaces. She is also a member of the Freeplay board.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project is funded by an ARC Future Fellowship grant (project title: *The Monetisation of Children in the Digital Games Industry*, FT220100076).

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